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Rafael Nadal: epic Wimbledon triumph in 2008 against Roger Federer freed me from my mental prison

In the first of three exclusive extracts from his autobiography, Rafael Nadal gives the inside story of the greatest game he ever played against Roger Federer in the 2008 Wimbledon final.



Flat out: Rafael Nadal celebrates after finally beating Roger Federer in the 2008 Wimbledon final Photo: GETTY IMAGES

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The silence, that’s what strikes you when you play on Wimbledon’s Centre Court. You bounce the ball soundlessly up and down on the soft turf; you toss it up to serve; you hit it and you hear the echo of your own shot. And of every shot after that. Clack, clack; clack, clack.

The trimmed grass, the rich history, the ancient stadium, the players dressed in white, the respectful crowds, the venerable tradition all combine to enclose and cushion you from the outside world.

The feeling suits me; the cathedral hush of the Centre Court is good for my game. Because what I battle hardest to do in a tennis match is to quiet the voices in my head, to shut everything out of my mind but the contest itself and concentrate every atom of my being on the point I am playing. If I made a mistake on a previous point, forget it; should a thought of victory suggest itself, crush it.

The final of 2008 against [Roger Federer](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/tennis/rogerfederer/) was the biggest match of my life. I’d lost the previous two years in the final, both times against Federer, and my defeat in 2007, which went to five sets, left me utterly destroyed. I wept after that loss.

I cried incessantly for half an hour in the dressing room. Tears of disappointment and self-recrimination. One year later I was determined that whatever else gave way, this time my head would not.

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At dinner the night before, I was already beginning to play the match in a space inside my head. I cooked, as I do most nights during [Wimbledon](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/tennis/wimbledon/). It helps settle my mind. That night I served pasta with shrimps.

After dinner I played darts with my uncles and at 12.45am I went to bed, but only dozed off at four in the morning. At nine I was up. It would have been better to have slept more, but I felt as alert and nimble and full of energy as I ever had.

For breakfast I had my usual: cereal, orange juice, a milk chocolate drink and my favourite from home, bread sprinkled with salt and olive oil.

At about 11.30am after my final practice session on Court 17 I went to the locker room. It’s not very big, maybe a quarter of the size of a tennis court. But the tradition of the place is what gives it its grandeur. The wood panels, the green and purple colours of Wimbledon on the walls, the carpeted floor, the knowledge that so many greats have been there.

It was unusually quiet, but this suited me. I was withdrawing deeper into myself, isolating myself from my surroundings, settling into the inflexible routines I have before each match.

Lunch was pasta – no sauce, nothing that could possibly cause indigestion – with olive oil and salt, and a straight, simple piece of fish. To drink: water.

At one o’clock, with an hour to go before the start, we went back to the locker room. Federer was already in there, sitting on the wooden bench where he always sits. Because we’re used to it, there was no awkwardness. In a little while we were going to do everything we possibly could to crush each other, but we’re friends. Rivals in other sports might hate each other’s guts even when they’re not playing against each other. We don’t.

The gap in talent with Federer existed, but it was not impossibly wide so I knew that if I silenced the doubts and fears, and exaggerated hopes, inside my head better than he did, I could beat him.

You have to cage yourself in protective armour, turn yourself into a bloodless warrior. It’s a kind of self-hypnosis, a game you play, with deadly seriousness, to disguise your own weaknesses from yourself, as well as from your rival.

To joke or chatter about football with Federer in the locker room, as we might before an exhibition match, would have been a lie he would have seen through immediately and interpreted as a sign of fear.

Instead, we shook hands, nodded, exchanged the faintest of smiles, went to our respective lockers, maybe 10 paces away from each other, and then each pretended the other wasn’t there.

THE MATCH

Set 1, Game 3

Federer had only lost two service games in six matches on his way to the final; this would be his third. I kept pinning him back on the backhand side and three times there he fluffed his shots. I was 2-1 up, next up to serve, and, for now, winning the psychological battle. My objective was to convey to him that he was going to have to spend hours stretched to the limit. He got the message. He did not let up again. But it was too late. I held all my service games and won it 6-4.

Set 2, Game 2

Federer was more fired up than I remembered seeing him. He won the game, broke my serve, blew me away. When he has these patches of utter brilliance, the only thing you can do is try and stay calm, wait for the storm to pass.

Set 2, Game 10

At 4-2 down I luckily broke his serve. He took it badly, lost his concentration, left that zone of brilliance he had entered, and two games later I broke him again. I was 5-4 up and serving. He had three break points in all, but finally surrendered with a hesitant backhand into the net. One more set and I’d be Wimbledon champion.

Set 3, Game 7

I was feeling fleet-footed and sharp. We were 3-3 and I was ready to kill off the match. Three times he came to the net and three times I won the point. He was rushing things, losing his cool. I was 0-40 up. But then I succumbed to the pressure. I have never forgotten the point at 30-40. A terrible memory. He hit a perfectly returnable second serve to my forehand, and I fluffed it completely, into the net.

Fear gripped me. That was a test of mental endurance, and I failed where I had trained myself all my life – to be strongest. We eventually went to a tiebreak and he killed me with his serving. I’d thrown it away.

Set 4, Game 8

Serving, at 5-2 up, I felt I was within touching distance of my life’s dream. And that was my downfall. Until now, the adrenalin had beaten the nerves; now suddenly the nerves trumped all. I felt as if I were on the edge of a precipice. I had never felt sensations quite like this before. I would end up losing a tiebreak and it was two sets all. Back to square one.

Set 5, Game 16

It was after nine at night and getting dark fast. I was serving for the match at 8-7. If we were back level after this game, the umpire might end play for the day, which could only help Federer. I thought, ‘I have to win this game by whatever means’.

On my fourth match point I hesitated on the serve and it ended up being neither one thing nor the other, but he returned the ball with little bite, giving me a simple forehand return.

He advanced on the ball, which dropped gently midcourt, and hooked it, not for a winner, but badly, awkwardly, into the middle of the net.

I collapsed flat on my back, arms outstretched, fists clenched, roaring with triumph. The silence of the Centre Court gave way to pandemonium, and I succumbed, at long last, to the crowd’s euphoria, letting it wash over me, liberating myself from the mental prison I had inhabited from start to finish of the match, all day, the night before, the full two weeks.

The fear of losing, the fear of winning, the frustrations, the disappointments, the poor decisions, the moments of cowardice, the dread of ending up weeping once again on the floor of the locker room shower: all gone now.

It wasn’t relief I felt; I was beyond that. It was a rush of power and elation, an uncorking of emotion I had kept bottled up for the tensest four hours and forty-eight minutes of my life, an invasion of the purest joy.

It’s impossible to imagine any other match that could have generated so much drama and emotion and such enormous satisfaction and joy.

These are edited extracts from Rafa: My Story by Rafael Nadal with John Carlin, published by Sphere (RRP £17.99). It is available from Telegraph Books for £16.99 plus £1.25 p&p. Please call 0844 871 1515 or go to books.telegraph.co.uk



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Go Rafa! I've never read a sports biography, but I think I may have to buy this one. I love how he's willing to put his guts on the page. How many men would admit to crying for half an hour for any reason? Having watched him play over the last few years, it's quite fascinating to get a glimpse into what's going on in his head. I've always wondering what he was thinking. A great athlete and from the sound of it, a great human being.

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Rafa, you seem to be all heart. Did it disturb you to see Federer break down and cry?  
  
You have brought something to all tennis players, and that is an ability to love your opponent whilst still being in your own power.  
  
A truly important lesson for all of us.

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I really really wanted to dislike Rafael Nadal - you look at him and you feel convinced that he's going to be an arrogant rooster in the Ronaldo mould.  
  
It's impossible to dislike him though, he's too good a bloke.

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Fantastic player. He has the absolute lot!!! Watched him win twice in the last two Wimbledon semi-finals in a seat not far away from him on the Centre Court - NO ONE has his charisma. Playing in a foreign land and the majority of people on the Centre Court were cheering him not the uncharismatic Murray. Novak will never be as popular as Rafa!

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Thanks for That

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Huge Novak fan, but I must say I find Rafa totally endearing.

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This was also the Greatest game John Maclnrow said he ever witnessed in his life, bar none & l must say the same for the millions who watched it. The passion ..the intensity, the fight of all fights..pure athleticism at its highest peak. Over 4hrs 40 min, gave all nail biting spectators more than a front row seat of the most unbelievable look at what it takes to become a Champion of Champions. The mental constructs in play.. Daring to be The Greatest, the measure of extreme endurance was in play, LIVE for the world to watch. It was the Best Match Ever ..lt literally changed lives as it happened..God himself had to Set The Scene for this Game. l became an instant fan not only of Rafa but of Tennis & have been since. (taking nothing away from Roger, it could only have been Roger Federer & know one else, in the face of this hungry opponent.) Who never knew that he had been training all his life for this, with every fiber of his mind body & spirit.

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Fascinating. Rafa's mental strength is a huge reason for his success and its interesting to see how he achieves it.   
  
One of the toughest competitors in any sport - an absolute warrior on the court and lovely off it.

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Dear Andy, please read this and take notes.

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Waste of time.........................  
maybe someone can read it to him..................  
Hey mummy springs to mind

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RT @Scienceofsport: Some interesting insights from Nadal on performance mentality. Looking forward to this autobiography. http://t.co/ZPtVWsS

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Looking forward to reading this. Always interesting to go inside of the mind of a great athlete. http://ow.ly/6702m

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Excerpts from Nadal's upcoming book. Athletes should pay attention to what he says about sports psychology: http://t.co/TbeBcqY

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the best sporting event i had watched ... http://t.co/CspWPp3 via @Telegraph

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Extract from #Nadal's autobiography. Can't believe I almost missed this! http://t.co/LkxGjT7

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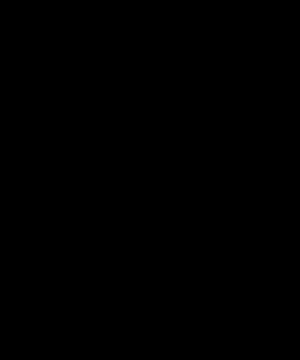
"Rivals in other sports might hate each other’s guts even when they’re not playing against each other. We don’t." #rafa http://j.mp/q3H6tp

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